Antebellum Life on an Edgecombe County Farm

By Monika S. Fleming*

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In 1968 citizens in Edgecombe County moved an old house from a farm near Conetoe (pronounced "Ka-nee-ta") about 10 miles north to Tarboro. The local historical society wanted to create a complex of historic buildings and make sure that the lives of earlier residents would not be forgotten. The small farmhouse, once owned by Silas and Rebecca Everett, is now located behind the larger Blount-Bridgers House. The two buildings are open for tours that highlight life in North Carolina during the antebellum era.

Both homes actually were built just before the antebellum period, which ran from the 1820s to the start of the Civil War. The two-story frame Blount-Bridgers House has a wide central hall with four rooms on each floor, a big basement, four large chimneys, and a large porch. Thomas Blount—a very wealthy landowner and United States congressman—owned the house, which was described in one 1810 document as the finest in the county. It once stood on a 990-acre estate north of Tarboro. According to 1815 tax records, the Blount family owned 13 enslaved people and at least six half-acre lots in town.

The Everett House in Tarboro features benches on its front porch, where antebellum residents probably sat to do chores. Today the house is also called the Pender Museum because members of the Pender family donated money to pay for its move into town. Images courtesy of Monika S. Fleming.

In contrast, the smaller, three-room Everett home has wood siding, detailed wood molding (called "dentil work" because it looks like rows of teeth), and brick chimneys on its two gable (sloped) ends. The same 1815 tax list noted that the Everetts owned 478 acres and one slave. Although the Everetts had more land than many Tar Heels, we could consider them yeoman, or

subsistence, farmers, typical of many families in eastern North Carolina in the early 1800s. While planters usually had 20 or more enslaved people working their land, yeomen farmed their own land and produced most of what their family needed to survive. They might own a few enslaved laborers and sell or trade a little of what they produced. Wealthier families often left behind more evidence of their lives. But historians can use primary sources such as buildings and documents to piece together the story of households like the Everetts'.

During the antebellum era, Edgecombe County—located in the northeastern Coastal Plain—was a significant farming community. The county seat of Tarboro operated as a thriving river port. The county's population grew from 10,000 in 1800 to over 17,000 by 1860. The 1850 census counted 1,600 households and almost 900 farms; most farms contained between 100 and 500 acres. Land was one of the most important signs of wealth; society at the time considered ownership of enslaved people as another.

The Everett House is described as a Carolina cottage, a common style and size of home in the 1800s in the Coastal Plain. It has a wide front porch with tapered columns. Benches, built across the front of the house under the windows, are an unusual feature. The porch provided shade from the sun and probably served as an outdoor work area where Rebecca could have shucked corn or snapped beans from her garden. Families and neighbors sometimes shared such common jobs (and bigger ones like quilting or barn raising), mixing work with social time. The house's interior walls, floors, and ceilings are made of wood. Many buildings of the era have plaster walls, but this one features fine carpentry inside and out, and a wood shingle roof. A craftsman or artisan must have built it.

Inside the paneled front door is a large central room. A fireplace on the right wall provided heat during the antebellum era. Most farms in the early 1800s had separate kitchen buildings with large fireplaces and utensils for cooking in the fire. Kitchens were separate, for one thing, because families did not want the extra heat in the house in the summertime. The Everetts' house is small, with one of its fireplaces larger than the other. Some cooking likely took place in this main room, especially in the winter. A window to the right of the door, and a second smaller window beside the fireplace, would have brought daylight into the house in the years before electricity. Furniture in the room likely consisted of a table, chairs, a corner cupboard to hold dishes, and a spinning wheel for turning cotton into thread.

To the left, as one enters the front door, another door leads into two smaller rooms. The larger one has a fireplace to provide heat, with a small window on the side. This room served as the main bedroom. The furniture would probably be limited to a rope bed, a chest, and possibly a chair or two. No one had mattresses like the ones people have today. Many beds were simply wooden frames with ropes woven across the frame to support bed linens, which usually included a cotton covering filled with corn shucks or straw. Wealthier families might have sturdier bed frames, with feathers filling their mattresses. The smaller room behind this bedroom could have been designed for children or as a storage room holding trunks or chests. Early houses usually had no closets; people hung their few clothes on pegs on the walls. Pegs over the door would have held a gun.

Directly across the main room from the front door is the back door, which leads to the back porch. Opening both doors at the same time allowed air to flow through the house, creating a breeze in hot weather. Inside the back door stands a winding, enclosed staircase that leads to a large open loft. In many houses, the loft would have provided sleeping quarters for children or for slaves if no slave cabins stood on the property. There is not a fireplace upstairs. Two small windows near the chimneys let in light. The house contains no bathrooms. The Everetts would have gone outside to what was called a privy, or outhouse. This structure would have been located several yards away from the main house, because of the smell. At night, if people did not want to go out in the dark, they would use a chamber pot and empty it the next morning. A shed room off the back porch has its own entrance and does not open into the main house. Shed rooms do not have fireplaces. They were used for storage or by travelers, enslaved laborers, or free farmhands. These small rooms could hold a single bed and perhaps a chest or trunk for storage.

While this small house was large enough for the Everetts, it would have been quite crowded for a couple with eight to 10 children, which is how many people lived in the house after Rebecca died. The children would have shared not only a bedroom but beds.

During the antebellum years, people did not just eat or sleep in the house. They also did a lot of the daily work that a household required from all of its members: cooking, preparing food to store for the winter, spinning thread, and sewing. The residents relied on sunlight and, at night, on candles or lamps that burned precious whale oil and later kerosene. Meat might have been kept in a separate smokehouse—a small building often found on farms—where it could be preserved by using salt and dense smoke. Other buildings probably would have included a barn for animals and perhaps a shed for storing tools like a plow.

Rooms and artifacts, or objects, can give us some information about what life was like in the past, but to discover more, historians need written records, too. Researchers have found numerous letters and diaries about life during the antebellum era. Unfortunately, none from the Everetts seem to have survived. The 1850 census lists Rebecca as illiterate, for one thing. During the early 1800s, many Tar Heels—especially women—never went to school and never learned to read or write. What little researchers have learned about the family comes from records such as wills, land deeds, and censuses, which are federal government records taken every 10 years to help Congress know how many people live in an area.

Silas and Rebecca lived in the house from about 1810, when they purchased the farm, until their deaths. Court records indicate that Silas died between 1835, when he wrote his will, and 1840, when the will was presented in court. Based on the will, he owned at the time of his death 478 acres of land, which he left to his wife. Silas also left property to four sisters and a nephew. The Everetts do not seem to have had any children, which was fairly unusual at the time. The census did not list people by first name, other than the head of every household, until 1850. Before then, all historians have are an age range and gender for each household member. The 1820 census lists Silas Everett as a white male between the ages of 25 and 45. His household includes a white female in the same age group. This is probably Rebecca. The census lists four enslaved people in the household: one adult male, one adult female, and two males under the age of 14. No names are given. It is possible that the Everetts had purchased an enslaved family to help them work the farm since they had no children. By the time of Silas's death, he owned nine enslaved persons.

In addition to counting people, census takers gathered other information that changed from census to census. The 1850 census included the names of all the white members of a household, along with an agricultural census and a slave census. Rebecca was listed as 71 years old and still on the farm. She had hired an overseer to run the farm and supervise the enslaved workers. The agricultural census (officially it was an agricultural *schedule* listing everything raised on a farm) of 1850 for Rebecca Everett shows she had 475 acres of land, but only 175 were plowed for crops. Her land was valued at just over $300, with the farm value listed as $3,000. She owned four horses, three cows, two oxen, seven head of cattle, and 75 swine or pigs. This livestock was valued at $400. The horses would have pulled a buggy or wagon so Rebecca could get to town without walking. Oxen were used to plow the land to grow crops. Cows provided milk, and women churned milk to make butter. The cattle and pigs also would have been raised for food. The census indicated Rebecca had slaughtered $200 worth of livestock that year, most likely pigs and a steer to provide meat for the household.

Along with livestock, Rebecca raised 40 bushels of rye, a type of grain used to make flour for bread. She harvested 900 bushels of corn, 130 bushels of peas and beans, 10 bushels of Irish potatoes, and 130 bushels of sweet potatoes. In the 1800s, sweet potatoes were a popular food. They could be stored for months in a cool, dark place like a root cellar or under a house without spoiling. Rebecca's farm produced one bale of cotton, which would have weighed about 400 pounds. Most farmers used the crops they raised, selling or trading any extra to get other goods. Rebecca probably sold part of her crops, along with some of the 55 pounds of butter and 60 pounds of beeswax or honeycomb the census reports that her farm produced. Women melted down wax to make candles. Some of the cotton may have been used to make clothing and household linens.

By the 1860 census, Rebecca had continued to do well on the farm. No overseer is listed, but a young woman, Nancy McGowan, and her two-year-old son are listed as living with Rebecca. Because of Rebecca's age, Nancy likely managed the house, cooking and cleaning. The farm was valued at $4,000. Rebecca owned 12 enslaved people, five of them younger than 12. Crop production had increased to over 1,250 bushels of corn, two bales of cotton, and 100 bushels of peas. Irish potato production stayed about the same, but sweet potato production had nearly doubled to 250 bushels. The farm produced seven bales of hay, 125 gallons of honey, and 20 pounds of beeswax. Rebecca had five horses and five cows, eight cattle, and the same number of oxen and swine. She estimated the value of her slaughtered livestock to be $500. She likely had to kill more pigs and cattle to feed everyone.

Rebecca dictated her will in 1860 for someone else to write down. It left her land, slaves, and other property to relatives, including sisters and cousins. She died in the winter of 1864–1865. But if you are ever in Tarboro, you can still stop in and visit the building that she called home so long ago.

**At the time of this article's publication, Monika S. Fleming served as the Historic Preservation Program coordinator at Edgecombe Community College in Tarboro.*